The Pennsylvania German Dialect in Sterling, Illinois

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Sterling, an attractive manufacturing city of about 10,000 inhabitants on the beautiful Rock River in northern Illinois, was founded by Hezekiah Brink in 1834. (1) It is named after Col. Sterling of Pennsylvania. The first Pennsylvania Germans who came to Whiteside County arrived in 1847. Some of them, namely the Landises, belonged to the Reformed Mennonites, a conservative branch, which is absolutely exclusive in its religious relations and was founded in 1812 in Lancaster County, Pa., by J. Herr. (2) Others formed the Mennonite congregation on Science Ridge near Sterling. Henry S. Landis arrived in 1851; Benjamin Stauffer in 1852; A. Detweiler, J. Moyer, J. Heckler, J. Millhouse, B. Hershey, J. Allebaugh and others, mostly from Lancaster and Bucks Counties, came before 1860; the Snavelys came from Lebanon County; 55 people, among them J. Rutt, J. Ebersole and J. Reitzel, arrived from Chambersburg, Pa., in 1865.

The Pennsylvania Germans who were particularly successful were by no means the only German element in the city. The number of German churches shows the various German influences in Sterling. German Catholics built the "Church of the Sacred Heart" in 1884; there are two German Lutheran Churches in Sterling and one German Baptist Brethren Church. (3) German societies as the "Germania Maennerchor," which was organized in 1869, and the "Sterling Turnverein Society," organized June, 1873, used to belong to the largest and most active organizations in Sterling. A German paper, the "Sterling Beobachter," which was started by Carl Strack in 1877 and bought by Louis Oltmanns in 1882, continued its publication for more than 25 years.

Now only the two Lutheran churches still have some German preaching. (4) The German societies have ceased to exist. Not even the Public Library has one copy of the "Beobachter." The local public High School, where German was dropped in 1919, offers instruction in one foreign language, namely French! The other High School, a private Catholic institution, offers Spanish because some Mexicans in the congregation insisted upon that language. The Germans have never made any attempt to reintroduce the German language in the public High School. H. Weber states as to the preaching in the Reformed Mennonite Church (l. c. p. 566): "There seems to have been no disturbance in the transition from the 'Pennsylvania Dutch' to the English." The Science Ridge congregation, which abandoned German preaching many decades ago, had according to him in 1882 four Sunday school classes "all conducted in German or Pennsylvania Dutch." It is obvious from other passages in his book that H. Weber had no clear understanding of the big differences between High German and the Pennsylvania German dialect and no interest in linguistic aspects.

The deplorable state of High German in Sterling presupposes a similar situation for Pennsylvania German. The dialect will have entirely disappeared in at best ten years. The number of speakers is extremely small. They use English almost exclusively now. Some of them (Mrs. G., Miss E.) remember the Pennsylvania German expressions only by hearkening back. Some only occasionally use the dialect: "when we feel funny" (Mrs. K., Miss R., living in the same house); "when we don't want the kid to understand us" (Mrs. S. and her daughter-in-law). Others can tell the exact date when they stopped to use the dialect regularly: "after my mother had died" (wife of one Reformed Mennonite minister); "after my husband had died" (Mrs. S.). Only old people have even a passive knowledge of the dialect. Nobody ever made any effort to speak Pennsylvania German to the children, so none in the younger generation knows the dialect at all. One family (Mr. M. 78, Mrs. M. 77, grandmother 96) still use exclusively the dialect among themselves. Mrs. M.'s parents came from Lebanon County. She was born and "ufgebrawcht" (as she put it) seven miles outside of Sterling.

With pencil and notebook I invaded various homes, fortunately also the one of that family. I recorded samples of their dialect by asking for Pennsylvania German expressions and for the English ones. This made them quite conscious of the difference of the two languages. Whenever my informants hesitated and declared not to know the Pennsylvania German word, they used the English expressions without any sound substitutions, e. g. porch, library, squirrel. The form "schkwoerl" was sometimes given though. The informants did not hesitate, because they were conscious of the phonetic difference, when they gave krick for creek, rewer, for river, poscht offis for post-office.

The bilingual state of the informants makes borrowings from English very easy. When some words were taken over, they were, by substitution of certain sounds, made to conform with the Pennsylvania German phonemic system. In some cases not only sounds were changed, but whole German endings and words were used for parts of an English word or compound. In other cases the English word was taken over with its regular English sounds and no substitutions occurred at all. Examples for type 1 are: **wetterboard,** or **wetterboarding** (5) (Mrs. G.) for weatherboards; **molassich** (Mrs. M.) molasses, **schul-ma'm** for school-ma'm, **bleckbere** (Mrs. S., **blekbire**) for blackberries, **rigiwegschtehschn** railwaystation, **'n car treive** for drive a car. Examples for type 2 are: bath, in the phrase "nehmscht du dei Bath heit"; furthermore, porch, library, etc.

It is interesting to observe into which parts of the vocabulary English words intruded. Nobody in the community seemed to have ever used anything else but "aunt" (sometimes "ent"); only one elderly lady (Miss R.) said that one of her nephews "made fun of her" by calling her "Tante." For father the expressions "pep, ded, dawdi" were given; for uncle "onkel" with apologies. Obviously the phonetic difference between the sound for English **u** and the German **o** was not noticed and the word was considered to be entirely English. Mrs. M. uses "grenpep," "grenmem," "mem" but for "nephew," "cousins," "gschwisterkinner." In her speech all expressions concerning local and national government, public affairs, also all expressions concerning parts of an automobile, the names of the flowers in her garden, most of the vegetables and spices are English. She considers "rhubarb" to be the "Dutch expression" for "pie-plant." The trees have largely German names: **plawmebawm; birebawm, keschte** (chestnut). She uses English expressions for most of the kinds of fish: salmon, trout, pike, etc. She says **hameliflesch** (veal), **seiflesch** (pork), but **beef;** she says both "goose" and "gans", and "turkey," but a "turkey gobbler" is a "welschhawne" in her speech. She gave the names of the months in English, also she would use English numerals right in the midst of a German conversation. When asked for Pennsylvania German numerals, she knew them, but added she "got them at home, having learned only to count in English in school."

According to the religious denomination of the informants some would render church by "karich," others by "gmehaus." One informant called the latter "more German than karich." Some informants called the bedroom "kammer," the sitting-room "schtub" (or Anglicized "sitz-schtub"). One informant stated that a "kammer" is a bedroom downstairs, and a "bettschtub" is upstairs. Another says "klederbrush," and explains that "bascht" is not for clothes, only for scrubbing. But Mrs. S. speaks both of a "klederbascht" and a "scrubbascht."

Influence of instruction in High German or of the preaching was occasionally noticeable. An informant offered beside the natural **grumbere** for potatoes, the form **kartoffels** (with an English plural ending!). Mrs. S., who claims not to have had any German in school, says: "Mir hawe a gawrde." She thinks "hawe" is superior to "hen," which I suggested. She also says "die ander" instead of "die anner."

Of interest are the following phonological features. Mrs. G. thinks the form "sigehr" is better than "sigar," but she says "karpet" not "kerpet," which she has heard. Mrs. S. says "karpet" but corrects herself and changes it to "kerpet," and "car" is "kehr" in her speech. This interesting vacillation between **er** and **ar** is to be found in native words also. The expression for strawberries is (beside the Anglicized form "**strawbere,**" given by one informant" "e (r) ble" according to some "a(r)ble," according to others; 6.45 is either "fetl bis siwe" or "fatl bis siwe." Mrs. G. says **kasche** for cherries, Mrs. S. **kesche.** Mrs. G. says **schtarem,** but "es schtamt" (**r** silent). This type of pronunciation is also found in the expression for earth-worm, "fischwarem," sometimes "fischworem".

The number of active speakers of the dialect in Sterling is six now, but about 40 to 45, or may be a few more, retain a passive knowledge of it. Even three of the "active speakers" use English much more, the other three are bilingual. Pennsylvania German has developed into a private means of communication between certain members of families, but is never used to outsiders or friends, even if they are superficially familiar with the dialect. About 20 years ago local store-owners, even clerks in banks, etc., had to use Pennsylvania German every day. Mrs. M's. brother found his knowledge of the dialect a great help in business. From the moment the dialect speakers ceased to talk Pennsylvania German to their children before they went to school, it was doomed to die out. The unnecessarily large number of loans from English show the difficult status of the dialect in a place, where it will only exist a few years longer.

Sterling is by no means the only Pennsylvania German "Sprachinsel" (speech-island) in Illinois. There are others near Freeport, in Morrison, Cullom Tiskilwa, Shelbyville, near Bloomington and Peoria. The biggest "Sprachinsel" is probably the Amish settlement in Douglas, Moultrie and Coles counties, near Arthur, Illinois. It would be an interesting problem to ascertain the actual total number of speakers of the dialect at the present time. Unfortunately the official census of the United States gives only the mother tongue of the "foreign-born white population," because it obviously takes it for granted, that the mother tongue of American-born citizens is always English.

1. Cp. Sterling Daily Gazette, Centennial Ed., June. 1934. 14 ff.

2. Harry F. Weber, Centennial History of the Mennonites in Illinois (1829-1929), Goshen, Ind. 1931. p. 561 ff.

3. William W. Davis, History of Whiteside Co., Ill., Chicago 1908. p. 332 ff.
Charles Brent, History of Whiteside Co., Ill. Morrison, Ill. 1877. p. 390 ff.

4. The attendance at the German service compared with the English is in the Lutheran Churches in Sterling 64: 175 (Rev. W. J. Voeltz), 33: 120 (Rev. Doermann); in Rock Falls across the Rock River at the St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church 24: 226.

5. I am using English spelling for English words whenever no sound substittutions are noticeable. Some dialect writers do not distinguish between words with sound substitutions and those without.